

OUR OWN DEVIL'S ISLAND



Alcatraz, the little American Military Prison, from which there is practically no escape, and where the dull routine drives men to throw themselves upon a passing log, braving the sentries' guns and trusting to be picked up at sea by a passing ship, only to be recaptured and doomed to greater punishment.



PRISONERS ON THE ISLAND

How one attempt to escape has recently proved successful through the cleverness of four prisoners who forged their own pardons, and by pure bluffing completely deceived the authorities and were allowed to depart in peace.

WHILE the news of the complete justification of Dreyfus, the famous prisoner of France's Isle du Diable, has spread hurriedly over the whole world and congratulations have been showered upon the French army officer, there comes a story from the Pacific coast of a daring escape from our own Devil's Island, that military prison of the United States on the rock of Alcatraz from which egress without a formal permit has hitherto been considered impossible and from which prisoners have tried in vain to escape.

Alcatraz lies out in the bay of San Francisco, a mere jutting peak of solid rock—impenetrable, without permit from the commandant; to be entered, as at Gibraltar, only by tunnels and serpentine, and circled round with palings from which rise the stockaded sentry boxes of no end of guards. In fact Alcatraz is an Isle du Diable in miniature, and sentences to it are held as the most severe court-martial can inflict.

It remained, however, for a long-sentence prisoner at Alcatraz to enact the cleverest forgery the United States Government has yet known, and to carry out the most consummate example of nerve of which there is record anywhere in our official files.

To realize just what was involved in such plot it is necessary to understand the situation and nature of the island—in short, to make a little journey to the prison peak in the bay of San Francisco.

Bristles With Guards

It is not a long ride to Alcatraz. Before you know it the Government steamer draws up at the little wharf—a dock bristling with guards, and soldiers in blue, and above them all, the officer of the day of Alcatraz, resplendent in khaki uniform. It reminds you of pictures of White Russia, or along the trans-Siberian routes. Two army mules, to an old-fashioned wagonette, waiting to convey the newcomers up the mountain side; some Indians at work, beneath the watchful eyes of a patrol; another large, new barracks for the troops in charge, being built almost at the shore, and, above all, the hill of green with the stockade, and the gallery, along which still other sentries take their ceaseless course. Still higher up there is another building, stern and penitential in its air, to add the crowning touch to the picture.

There is no parting of the ways at Alcatraz. You do as you are bidden at the dock. Into the wagonette and up a steep winding hill, such as Gibraltar prides herself in possessing; through a tunnel beneath the new barracks, and then on, up the heights, to headquarters. You are tempted to take notes of this road to prison, but hardly dare. There are guards everywhere; what if they take you for a spy?

You are already imbibing the "local color" of the island. One guard recalls the time, not long since, when there were but 250 prisoners on the island. Another refers to the year 1902, when it is reported that the number rose to 500, owing to the war with Spain, and the consequent mustering out of the volunteers. Eighteen months then was the average term of commitment, though three men received life penalty for desertion to the enemy, at that time. Since the opening of the prison, about the year 1932, very nearly every crime known to the category of army misdemeanors has been recorded here, everything in fact from drunkenness on guard (for which one may receive six months or a year) upward. Petty larceny, strange to say, is one of the most frequent causes for commitment to Alcatraz.

Then too, Alcatraz is not without variety. Men are sent here from as far south as New Mexico and north to Omaha; while St. Louis and Hawaii or even the Philippines, are the other boundaries.

The Day's Work

Prison life, too, is a constant topic of conversation when there is a newcomer in the wagonette. At 5:40 in the morning an electric gong calls to the day's work. Then there is the daily verification, each prisoner standing

forth, before his cell, to prove his presence. It seems foolish, but there have been escapes even from Alcatraz, and the driver tells of how the fogs almost envelop the island in the night, and how, on one such time, a row boat came close in and prepared to carry off a prisoner, as per arrangement in a cipher letter the man must have received. Skillful, indeed must that cipher have been, and concocted before the imprisonment, for all mail at Alcatraz is inspected before it reaches those within the stockade.

The uniform of Alcatraz, as these men line up, is one sufficient in itself to mark them as folk apart. Practically a soldier's suit, dyed brown, there is a heavy "P" for prisoner, stamped on the back—that he who runs may be read by all whom he may chance to pass. Prisoners here are of three classes. On arrival a man is put in the second class, and if his conduct is exemplary he is advanced to the first, and may be recommended to the Secretary of War for a reprieve or shortening of sentence. In the third class, on the other hand, the disorderly and vicious men are set, and to them harder tasks are assigned, and while employed at these they do not earn "good conduct time," as it is called, by means of which all save life-prisoners can earn five days off every thirty to which they have been condemned.

For breakfast on Alcatraz there is mush and coffee and bread (butterless, obviously), and potatoes, too, are added. At 6:30 the men line up and by 7 work has begun. Everywhere there are guards preventing escape where it might be contemplated, and also serving as perpetual safeguard against such possibility as a mutiny.

As to the ages of the prisoners the men one sees employed on the buildings and about the roads will vary anywhere from twenty-one to forty-five or fifty.

Until noon, when there is luncheon, as per regular army rations, and then again until 4:30 in the afternoon the prisoners are kept at their several tasks. At 5:15 supper is served, and from it they retire (under dire penalties) to inside the stockade. Many of them make their way into the cells. There are 152 of these chambers in the so-called "old prison" alone, and four companies of infantry see to it that no stranger bothers their sleep.

Only One Thought—Escape

It is this dull routine of prison life that drives men to set their brains on edge to one point only, and that—escape.

If necessity be the mother of invention, necessity certainly is a constant enough on Alcatraz to exercise the keenest human brain, if it would get away from the little peak.

To see the prisoner in his cell is to get to the kernel of the island and to realize the boundless hope that can alone inspire any man to try to regain liberty from thence.

In company with a commissioned officer you climb the hill to a great stockade surrounding the prison yard, and in itself inclosed by a sort of gallery from sentry house to sentry house, along which the sentinels patrol. Beyond this high white fence several buildings seem to rise, whetting the curiosity of the visitor.

You climb onto the stockade—twelve and a half feet high, you are told—and look down into the prison yard. They are only eighty feet over the sea down there, but they might as well be eight thousand. Just below us is a ditch twenty-eight feet across, guarded by four patrols in the daytime and three at night. That constitutes the dead line.

Over the moat is the main prison building, a great two-story frame, set with small windows, one window to every two men in the cells.

There, however, comes the next safeguard. The sentry on the balcony just behind has charge of the gate opening into this division, and is held accountable for who passes through. Only a commissioned officer can give the "Open sesame" to enter the yard below. From the sentry box at one side the lever operating the gate, a speaking

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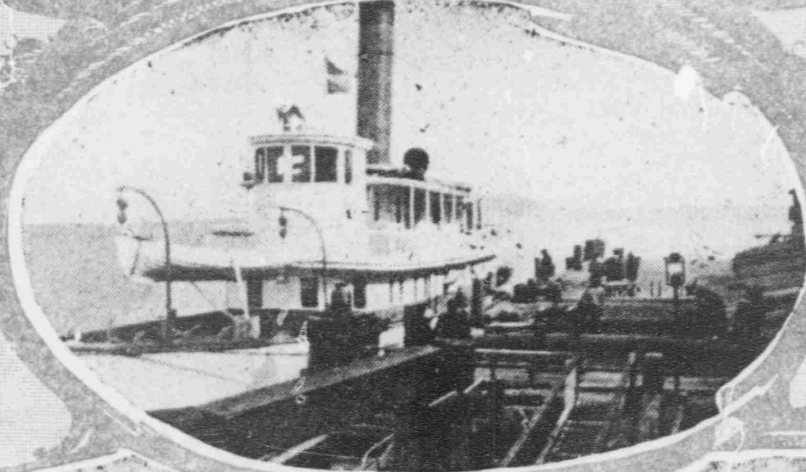
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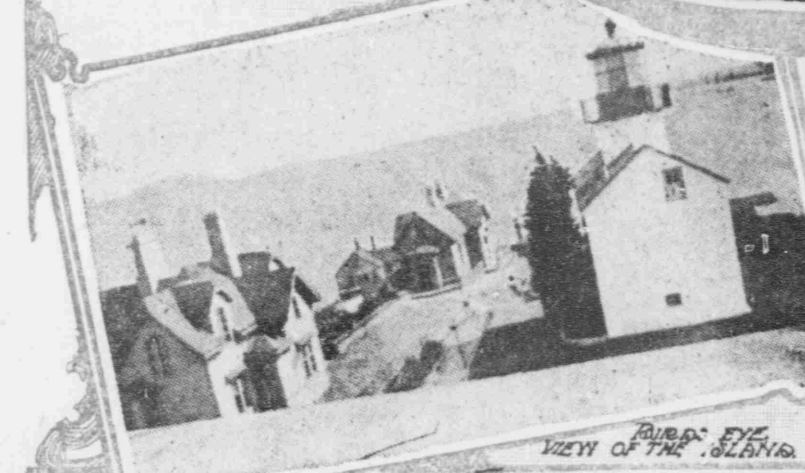
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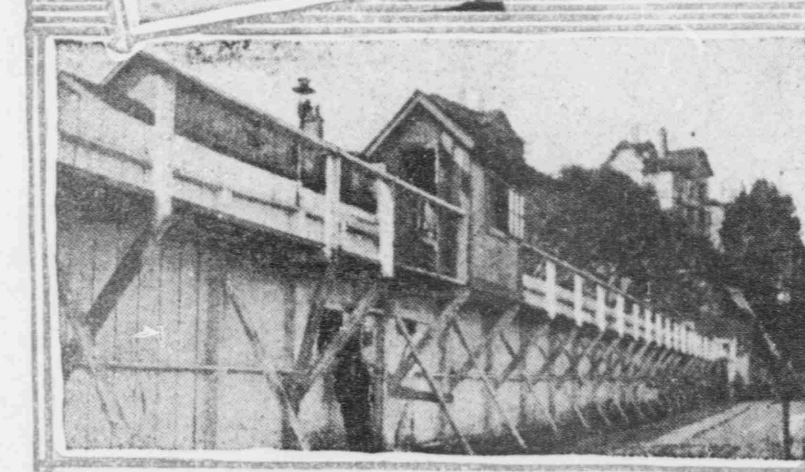
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THE LANDING AT ALCATRAZ



VIEW OF THE ISLAND



THE PRISON ON THE ISLAND

tube extends to the sergeant of the guard, so that the slightest suspicion of the sentinel may be verified.

If one follows the balcony along he will look down on a second paved court and storeroom and can pass on to the dungeon entry.

A Careful Guard

Not even for the instant that it requires to take a photograph will this point be left unguarded, and the call to the sergeant of the guard to replace the lone picket while he poses in the picture is taken up from guard to guard with dramatic vigor, until it reaches, dim and echoed by the penitential walls, the keeper of the prison, the sergeant of the guard.

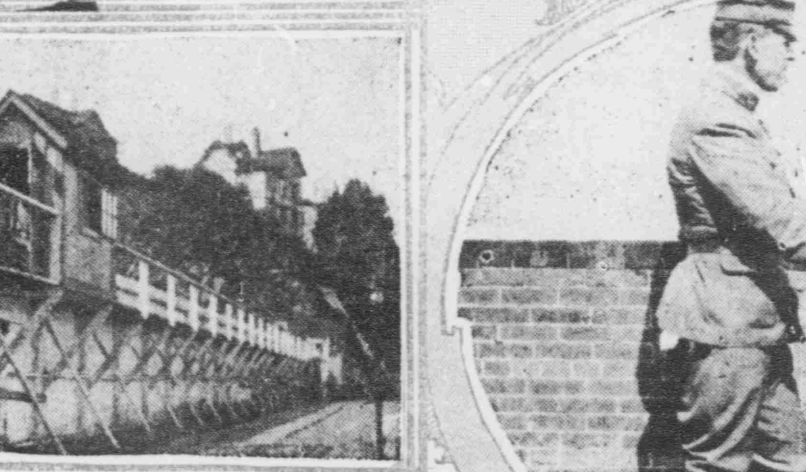
Everywhere, as one passes, the prisoners stand erect at attention, arms folded before them, while the guards present arms. Beyond you can see the peak, with a lighthouse, and the officers' homes and the American flag, symbol of liberty, but to this one acre of American soil liberty does not apply. A sergeant, with the keys at his belt, accompanies you into the prison mess halls, the heart of Alcatraz.

To right and left, on the floor of stone, bare wooden tables and stools are set, a tin can at each place. Curiously enough, at one end of the room there is a stage, and there, perhaps once a year, a play is given, the plot the product of some prisoner.

They serve you coffee here, at the heart of Alcatraz, and over the steam-



VIEW OF THE ISLAND



THE PRISON ON THE ISLAND

ing cup Captain Humphreys, the genial officer of the day, tells of the escape from Alcatraz.

"I have delayed it until here," he explains, as one's eyes drink in the air of the prison, "that you might appreciate all the more the magnitude of the undertaking, the escape from Alcatraz."

Flight Planned Skillfully

"It is now a little over a year ago that there was perpetrated on Alcatraz the most skillfully planned escape known to army circles, probably. The plan was founded on the ruling that through the headquarters of the department, and again through garrison headquarters, a prisoner may put in an application for leniency and be allowed to quit the island and leave the sentence not completely served. This, of course, is only done in cases of especially good conduct and the like.

"There is comparatively little for the men to do on Alcatraz, except when building is going on, and so after a month and a half on the island a prisoner becomes a trusty and is assigned such tasks as may arise. Certain among these men, for instance, are given charge of certain papers and correspondence, and among them our hero was once counted. Quite a number of these men, it must be recalled, are very bright, and not a few graduates of institutions of advanced learning. These, then, become practically clerks in the prison office.



THE ENTRY TO THE DEAD LINE



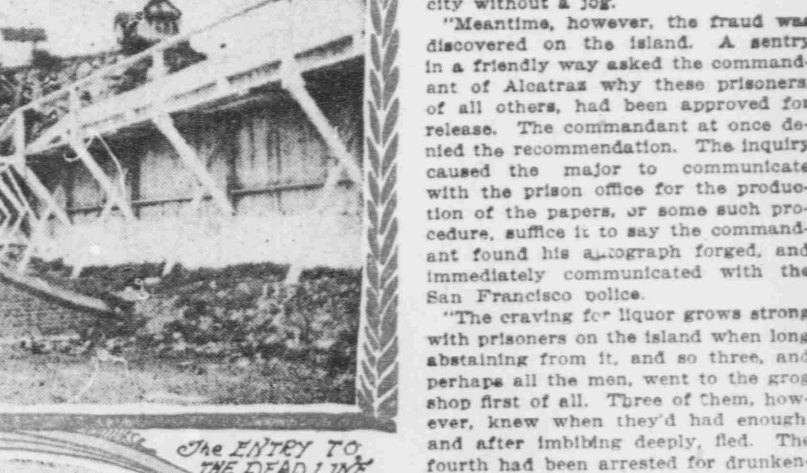
The OFFICER OF THE DAY

"There were four in the plot, the head of the coterie, the chief printer of the island, likewise a prisoner. Together these men found the time to draw up and print an official paper, such as is used by the officers in the city when filing the prisoner's applications for leniency, and to this they duplicated the signature of the commanding officer of Alcatraz. The document bore all manner of splendid reasons for executive clemency—one and all of them written as though the recommendations of the island governor, the commandant of the prison island.

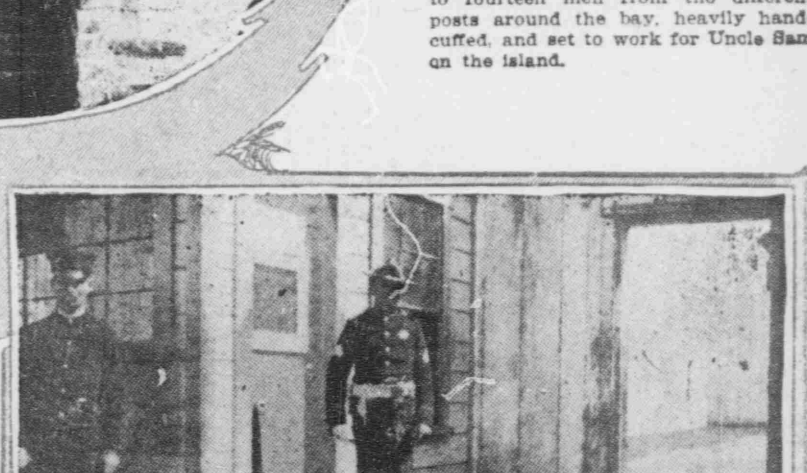
"This paper, then, the coterie managed to slip into the island mailbag, by reason of their duties in the office, and over the bay to San Francisco it went, undetected.

Released Without Question

"First to department headquarters; then from bureau to bureau, and finally up to the department commandant the little papers made their way. There, seeing the strong recommendations of the island governor, the commandant approved them and ordered the release of the men.



THE ENTRY TO THE DEAD LINE



THE MAN WITH THE KEYS

"Back then to the place of their fabrication, approved, came the recommendations for pardon, and to the headquarters at Alcatraz. From island headquarters, reapproved, to the prison office they went, bearing the orders to set the men free.

"A soldier's first duty is to obey his orders without question, and the men

were set free at once, by the prison officer.

"As is the custom in the army prisons, each of the men was given a suit of civilian clothing—hat, shoes, and underwear—and a check for \$5. Then they were put on the little boat, taken to San Francisco and released, despite the fact that some of them still had three or even four years to serve.

"Hardly arrived at the Golden Gate City, however, their nerve spurred them on to still greater things. The original forger in the affair proceeded to duplicate the signature of the quartermaster of the department to four checks, \$125 in all, placing on the checks the reasons for which they were issued, such as extra work out of prison hours and the like, and, knowing the forms to be employed, secured the money on the lot in the city without a fog.

"Meantime, however, the fraud was discovered on the island. A sentry in a friendly way asked the commandant of Alcatraz why these prisoners, of all others, had been approved for release. The commandant at once denied the recommendation. The inquiry caused the major to communicate with the prison office for the production of the papers, or some such procedure, suffice it to say the commandant found his autograph forged, and immediately communicated with the San Francisco police.

"The craving for liquor grows strong with prisoners on the island when long abstaining from it, and so three, and perhaps all the men, went to the grog shop first of all. Three of them, however, knew when they'd had enough, and after imbibing deeply, fled. The fourth had been arrested for drunkenness on the street. His identity became known and he was returned to Alcatraz, where he has now an additional forgery charge to serve.

"As for the rest they have never been found."

The New Building

We passed on into the new barracks in course of erection by the prisoners on one slope of the mountain, and the great blocks of gravel and concrete, set in sort of Italian tenement style, in a position that again recalled the British stronghold on the Mediterranean gave evidence that work is hard work on the island. Four companies of from 125 to 150 men are to be accommodated by this new building, and four floors and a basement are contemplated. For labor such as this prisoners are brought in squads of ten to fourteen men from the different posts around the bay, heavily handcuffed, and set to work for Uncle Sam on the island.

A sentence to this island for twenty years might as well be solitary imprisonment for such time. Conversation must run slack among the prisoners, with whom life is but a ceaseless monotony, so that escape alone can give food for thought. And so, at any time, we may expect to hear of other marvelous attempts to flee from our little western prison island.